

# What's in a Name? A Family Excavation

by Dr Mark St Leon (Member)

Much ink has been spilt in pursuit of that elusive notion, an Australian identity. In this article, I would like to spill some more.

For more than a century before the introduction of television in the late 1950s, an enormous industry of travelling shows kept Australians entertained, especially in regional and remote areas. One of the most conspicuous travelling shows was the circus and, for well over 100 years from 1847, my forbears – the St Leons – played a key role as circus proprietors and performers. The original St Leon was my great-great-grandfather, [to whom I will refer in this article as ‘my ancestor’]. He was an acrobat, equestrian, tightrope walker and circus proprietor, known for most of his colonial circus career as Matthew St Leon.

After the passage of five generations, the origins of both my ancestor and his seemingly aristocratic surname were shrouded in mystery. Growing up in North Shore domesticity, I was told (and believed) I was descended from French aristocracy. In 1969, aged 17 and only remotely aware of the family’s circus past, I began to make serious enquiries, about my ancestor in particular. Who was he? Where had he come from? How had he come to be a circus man? Why did he come to Australia?

The mystery surrounding the surname of St Leon as solved without too much difficulty.

The replacement of prosaic Jones with illustrious St Leon would prove to be the outer layer of a much deeper family mystery. Amongst many other things, I would eventually discover that not even Jone was the original family name. In this article, however, I will limit myself to outlining the basic steps—stumbles might be a better descriptor—I followed to seek the ultimate truth of my family name.

## The search

I undertook the first of countless investigative steps when I wrote to an elderly distant cousin, Roy Harvey of North Geelong, a grandson of my ancestor. Roy happily answered my unanticipated letter:

The first member of our family was John Leon Jones, he came from Wales in the 1840s. He was born 1819, died 1903 at the age of 84. [Not] long after coming to Australia he married Margaret Callaghan who came from the north of Ireland .... John Leon Jones was an acrobat until he became interested in training trick horses, this gave him the idea of forming a touring circus which he did, it being one of the first in the country. To make the circus sound more professional he dropped Jones from his name and added ‘St’ in front of Leon and the circus became known as St Leon’s and that name he held until the end ...<sup>1</sup>

This was all completely new to me. With Roy’s information, I obtained the death certificate of my ancestor John Leon Jones who had died at Normanby Street, Oakleigh in April 1903.<sup>2</sup> His stated occupation of circus proprietor and the names of his children were consistent with family recollections. He had married a woman named Margaret Monaghan (not Callaghan



*Matthew St Leon, colonial circus proprietor, Brisbane 1882. Mark St. Leon Collection, State Library of New South Wales, PXA 1567*

as recalled by Roy). There could be no doubt that this was my ancestor. Ominously, however, the names of his parents were ‘not known’ and the birthplace of Wales seemed questionable. While Roy’s information and my ancestor’s death certificate launched me on my journey of investigation, the indefinite information surrounding my ancestor’s birth and parentage raised a brick wall that long thwarted my desire to construct a comprehensive genealogical tree.

The date and place of death established, I then found a brief obituary published in a leading Melbourne newspaper:

The oldest circus proprietor in the colonies, professionally known as Mr St Leon (his proper name was John Leon Jones) died yesterday at his home at Oakleigh, aged 83 ... He was considered one of the finest trainers of horses in the world ...<sup>3</sup>

Then, I obtained the 1867 birth certificate of Roy’s mother, Amelia, a daughter of my ancestor and his wife, Margaret Monaghan. This yielded further information and further contradictions, although my ancestor’s wife, Margaret, had been the informant.

Specifically, the name of my ancestor—Amelia’s father—was stated as simply John Jones, not John Leon Jones.<sup>4</sup> It began to appear that neither St Leon nor Leon nor Matthew was any part of my ancestor’s original name. His occupation was stated, understandably, as “equestrian”. However, the certificate stated that my ancestor had married Margaret Monaghan in Hobart Town, Tasmania in 1848. Here was *prima facie* evidence that my ancestor had been sent to Australia as a convict for, in 1848, Tasmania was the penal colony known as Van Diemen’s Land. But dozens of convicts bearing the prosaic name of John Jones were landed in Van Diemen’s Land. Which John Jones was my ancestor? This obstacle was fortunately overcome when it was found that, in Hobart Town, on 21 November 1848, a convict named John Jones had applied, as convicts were required to do, to marry a freewoman named Margaret Monaghan.<sup>5</sup> There was no doubt that these were my great-great-grandparents and that this John Jones, who had been transported in 1843 by the *Forfarshire*, was the same as the circus proprietor, John Leon Jones, who had died in Melbourne in 1903. Furthermore, the marriage application revealed the convict number of John Jones, #10485. His convict records were located on the shelves of the Archives Office of Tasmania. One of these records stated that John Jones had been a tumbler at the Westminster Theatre in London.<sup>6</sup>

What had he done to be sent to Australia? In London, on the morning of Monday, 24 October 1842, a long line of some 300 prisoners passed through the Central Criminal Court, better known as the Old Bailey. Eventually, it was the turn of a youth calling himself John Jones to enter the dock and negotiate his fate. Several weeks earlier, he had been indicted for stealing a coat valued at £2.

*Prisoner’s Defence:* I met a young man with a bundle and this coat; he said, ‘If you will take this to Westminster Abbey I will give you 1s’. I did not intend to thieve the coat, I had not a farthing.

*William Luck* (police-sergeant B 10.): I produce a certificate of the prisoner’s former conviction ... (read) the prisoner is the person.<sup>7</sup>

William Luck, the police-sergeant in attendance at the trial, realised he had arrested my ancestor for a different crime in 1839. The fate of John Jones was sealed. His age was stated as 17 years—subsequent research indicated that he had already passed his 19th birthday—he was sentenced to seven years’ transportation.

But if this youth had previously been convicted of a felony in 1839, when and where did the earlier trial take place and what else might its transcript reveal?

My stock of knowledge about my ancestor’s origins expanded little further for almost 25 years. Then, in 1995, my dedicated London-based researcher, Peter Bennett, suggested we seek the indictment that brought John Jones before the Old Bailey in 1842. In those pre-internet days, I was previously unaware of this critical source but Peter knew exactly where to locate it in the National Archives at Kew. The 1842 indictment detailed not only the theft of the coat but also the earlier appearance of John Jones, late of St Marylebone, a labourer, before the Old Bailey, along with two accomplices, on 8 April 1839, when he was: “... by the name John Conley ... convicted of felony ...”<sup>8</sup>

The transcript of the earlier 1839 trial, scant as it was, yielded a few more gems of information:

*John Conley* ... [was] indicted for stealing, on the 4th of April, two-and-a-half bushels of soot, value 3s., the goods of William Andrews, the master of Conley ...

**MOUNT GAMBIER.**  
 THURSDAY & FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 8 & 9.  
**Two Nights Only!**  
**ST. LEON'S FOUR-CONTINENT CIRCUS,**  
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 Zoological Marvels from every clime and country will be found in the Menagerie.  
 Wonderful Performing Camels, a troupe of Royal Stallions, and a combination of WILD ANIMALS, of curious interest to lovers of the animal kingdom.  
 (Other particulars see posters, &c.)  
 GRAND PARADE of this Mammoth Show will take place through the principal streets of Mount Gambier on Thursday the 8th. Doors open at 7, commence at 8.  
 This Mammoth Show will exhibit at—  
 PENOLA, Saturday, February 10th.  
 M. ST. LEON, Sole Proprietor.  
 J. B. LEVY, General Agent.

*Advertisement for St Leon’s Circus, South Eastern Star, 6 February 1883, page 3.*

*William Andrews:* I am a chimney-sweeper, and rent premises in Duck-lane [Westminster] ... Conley had been five years in my service as an apprentice ... I keep my soot in that shed.<sup>9</sup>

So! My ancestor’s original name was neither St Leon nor John Leon Jones nor John Jones but ... John Conley!

If my ancestor gave his name as John Conley the first time he was arrested, in 1839, why had he given his name as John Jones the second time he was arrested in 1842? Found guilty at this earlier trial, his age stated as 15 years, Conley, was sentenced to a cautionary 10 days’ imprisonment—a taste of what he would receive, in larger measure, should he ever offend again. Presumably he hoped to obfuscate any cross-reference to his earlier felony, knowing that a second conviction would almost certainly guarantee transportation. But the ruse failed.

Nevertheless, it was the assumed name of John Jones that was entered into the civil records of England, and later those of the colonies of Australia. The original surname of John Conley/Connelly never entered colonial records at all, indeed would be completely unknown until the discovery, more than 150 years later, of the 1842 indictment.

The indictment also revealed my circus ancestor had been the apprentice of a chimney-sweeper. From the facts unearthed from the 1839 trial, we moved on to the UK census taken on the evening of Monday, 7 June 1841. The household of the chimney sweep, William Andrews, was found at 2 Orchard Street, Westminster in the parish of St Margaret, about two blocks from Duck Lane. The household included one John Connelly, now aged (apparently) 17 years, an apprentice apparently born—although this can now be questioned—within the county of Middlesex.<sup>10</sup> An age of 15 for




the April 1839 trial and 17 for the June 1841 census pointed to a birth year in or about 1824. So also did a service to his chimney-sweep master of five years at the time of the 1839 trial since the new *Chimney Sweeper's Act*, which came into force in July 1834, stipulated that no child under the age of ten years could be apprenticed to a chimney sweep.<sup>11</sup>

The variation in spelling [Conley, Connelly] notwithstanding, the John Connelly of Orchard Street in 1841 was obviously William Andrews apprentice John Conley brought before the Old Bailey in 1839. By extension, he had to be the colonial circus proprietor Mr St Leon who died in Melbourne 64 years later. A definite documentary trail was now established: from his 1903 death certificate, back to his 1848 marriage, back to his 1842 conviction, back to his 1839 imprisonment, and then forward to his 1841 London address. Furthermore, it could be confidently asserted that my ancestor's original surname was neither St Leon, nor Jones but Connelly or some spelling variant thereof.

## The outcome

John Jones, as he was now known, was landed in Hobart Town in October 1843, one of 239 prisoners transported by the *Forfarshire*.<sup>12</sup> In July 1847, he received his Ticket of Leave. Resurrecting his tumbling and equestrian skills, he appeared as an acrobat, dancer and equestrian in Australia's first circus, Radford's Royal Circus, which was opened in York Street, Launceston, on the evening of Monday, 27 December 1847.<sup>13</sup> [Figure 3]. This engagement launched not only his colonial circus career but, in due course, the careers of his progeny, the four generations of circus performers who followed him. By the time the last of his progeny left active circus life in 1963, five generations of the St Leon family had travelled not only Australia, but New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, China, Japan, India, Southeast Asia, South Africa, Cuba, Mexico, Canada and the United States. As well as circus, later generations of the family could be seen in vaudeville, in 'legitimate' theatre, on fairgrounds, on silent film, newsreels and early television.

## Postscript

As stated earlier in this article, the details of my ancestor's birth and parentage were long shrouded in mystery. It is only in recent years that the ever-expanding availability of online DNA, newspapers and civil records has enabled me to deduce that my ancestor was born in or near Bath, Somerset, in April 1823, the natural (illegitimate) son of a promising young Irish jockey named Patrick Connelly (1806-42) and a young lady of decidedly aristocratic origin, Ellen Catherine Ricketts (1806-86). In the mores of the day, an illegitimate birth within the upper echelons of society was frowned upon, all the more so if the other parent was drawn from the opposite end of the social spectrum. In stages, my ancestor would be progressively banished by his mother's family, his father and his foster family, and eventually condemned, at the age of 11, from the precincts of the racing town of Newmarket where he grew up, to serve a sham seven-year apprenticeship to a Westminster chimney sweep. All of that is another story. 

<sup>1</sup> Mark St Leon Collection, Mitchell Library, MSS 2165: Harvey, Roy, letter to Mark St Leon, dated North Geelong, 22 April 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate of Jno Jones (1903 No. 7015).

<sup>3</sup> "About People", *The Age* (Melbourne), 16 April 1903, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth Certificate of Amelia Jones (1867 No. 7361).

<sup>5</sup> Tasmanian Archives, CON52/3: Marriage Permissions, p. 235, John Jones & Margaret Monaghan, Marriages, 1848, RGD37/1/7, No. 1789.

<sup>6</sup> Tasmanian Archives: CON 14/1/23: Indent, John Jones; CON 18/1/40: Description List, John Jones; CON 33/1/44: Conduct record, John Jones.

<sup>7</sup> *Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674-1913*, John Jones, Theft: simple larceny, 24 October 1842, Ref. No. t18421024-2956.

<sup>8</sup> National Archives: CRIM 4/208/234, Old Bailey, Indictments, Felonies.

<sup>9</sup> *Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674-1913*, John Conley, Thomas Cousins, George Norris, Theft: stealing from master, 8 April 1849, Ref. No. t18390408-1347. For the benefit of the curious, soot was valuable as fertiliser and also for the manufacture of ink.

<sup>10</sup> National Archives: HO107, Census Returns of England and Wales, 1841, Piece: 738; Book: 7; Civil Parish: St Margaret; County: Middlesex; Enumeration District: 15; Folio: 26; Page: 1; Line: 23.

<sup>11</sup> *An Act for the Better Regulation of Chimney Sweepers and their Apprentices, and for the Safe Construction of Chimneys and Flues*, 4 & 5 Wm IV cap. 35, 1834.

<sup>12</sup> "Shipping Intelligence", *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 October 1843, p. 2. The official record shows that 239 prisoners were landed, not 329 as stated in this shipping report.

<sup>13</sup> Advertisement, *Cornwall Chronicle*, 22 December 1847, p. 4.

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